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Has the World Domesticated Your Church?

Mark 6:14-30

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In Mark 6:7, about the middle of the passage I used last week, we see the piece about how Jesus sent the disciples out two by two to do some ministry without him. We see what they are supposed to take with them, how they are to find lodging, and what they are to do. What they are to do is pretty much what I've been saying for the past year or so - they are to preach that men and women should repent. To repent means to acknowledge sinfulness and acknowledge the gap between where I am and where God wants me to be, and it means giving my life to God in a new and complete way. The other area of their ministry is to be the casting out of demons and the healing of the sick. So, from the text, we see that Jesus wanted his people to go out and do the ministry he had been doing with them.

We can presume, I think, that not all of this disciples were extraverts. We can presume that not all of them were natural evangelists. We can presume they were a fairly normal group of people except perhaps for the fact that they had been spending time with Jesus, who was doing these kinds of ministries all along. So I guess we need to accept that Jesus says pretty matter-of-factly that his ministry is supposed to be the ministry of his disciples. And unless you want to take a Roman Catholic position here and say that the *only* people he had in mind as doers of ministry were *those* twelve disciples, you have to pretty much believe that he was talking to us as well.

Which is to say, we are to do the ministry of preaching that our neighbors should repent, and we should also be involved in ministries of healing and the casting out of demons. If you think you should have a pass or a by on this, I'm unclear why you think it doesn't apply to you.

So, Jesus sends his people out in Mark 6:7-13 and they come back to report on how it went in Mark 7:30. The problem for today is why did Mark include this other story about the beheading of John the Baptist in-between the sending out and the returning?

I was reading a story the other day about how church officers were elected in a small country church. The way this church did it was to pass around offering plates to everybody present so they could put ballots for the people they wanted, but there was no slate of folk recommended by a nominating committee. Just pass the plates and wait for them to be counted. While everyone was waiting for the counters to return with the election results, the minister would lead everyone in the singing of a few hymns. It didn't matter which hymns they sang - any would do - since they were just killing a little time waiting. So maybe that's what the Gospel author Mark is doing here? "Well, there go the disciples to do ministry. They'll be back after a while so, while we're waiting, how about a story? Ever heard the one about the day Herod beheaded John the Baptist?"

Of course, I don't think this is the way it happened. I've argued for years that Mark is a careful writer and intentionally placed this story of John the Baptist between the sending out and the returning of the disciples. I believe the two have everything in the world to do with each other.

Simply put, Mark wants us to know that when the disciples go out to do the work of the kingdom, when the church rises up to be the church, that the world rises up to be the world. So, the disciples go out to preach and do ministry - good. But don't forget that John preached the kingdom too, and the world snuffed him out.

Now, all of this may sound a bit strange to us, because this is not our experience, we say. When we do the work of the church, the world rises up to call us blessed! When we preach the Gospel, the world invites us to join Kiwanis and Rotary. When we reach out to heal, the world puts us on the hospital board. All of this Mark would understand, I think. According to Mark, at first Herod didn't want to harm John the Baptist - he just wanted to domesticate him. Herod was perplexed by John, but as long as he could keep him in chains, under control, Herod heard John gladly. But when push came to shove, Herod was just as sorry as could be, nothing personal, but a promise was a promise, you understand, and John just had to go. When the church rises up to be the church, the world rises up to be the world.

Listen for a moment to a few words from another pastor's sermon:

> **In the gospel of Christ … one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us. The experiences of a new heaven and a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for *this* earth. May we give ourselves like Christ, not for self, but to give justice and peace to our people.**

Fairly inoffensive, right? It's just a sermon, just the church going about its business being the church, right? The only thing is, I left out part of it. The part I left out is that right after the preacher said, 'May we give ourselves like Christ, not for self, but to give justice and peace to our people," a shot rang out in the sanctuary and the preacher, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, was dead. Mark wants us to know - when the church rises up to be the church, the world rises up to be the world.

But Mark wants us to know something else as well. If Mark wants us to learn the hard truth that when the church rises up to be the church, the world rises up to be the world, he also wants us to know that, when the world rises up to be the world, Jesus Christ rises from the dead. In fact, Mark tells us that when Herod found out about the church being the church, about Jesus becoming known, Herod slapped his forehead and exclaimed something like, 'I thought I had that nailed down. John must have been raised from the dead!"

That's why Mark included the story of John the Baptist. He wants us to know you can't nail down Jesus. When the world is being the world, Jesus Christ is being Lord. As Luther put it in last week's opening hymn, 'the body they may kill / God's truth abideth still / his kingdom is forever."

I have a deep concern for the churches in this community. I see a great deal of power sharing, a longing to be recognized by the world, and a tremendous emulation of the ways the world defines success. I don't see a great deal of engagement with the world. I don't see much resistance to the Gospel. And this concerns me. Because when the church responds to Jesus' call to be

the church, when it goes into the world to proclaim the Gospel, the world will respond with resistance - even violence. Doing God's work is no guarantee that we will be loved and respected; indeed, it's almost certain that the more faithful we are, the more we will be treated like Jesus himself, who was despised and rejected.

I read of a story of a college professor who many years ago spoke with one of the church leaders who was resisting oppression in South Korea. He had just been released from a Korean prison where he had served a two-year term as a political prisoner. What was his crime? Preaching and teaching the kingdom of God. The conditions in the prison were so grim that the Korean man had begun to lose hope. Day after day, he found his faith ebbing away. He stopped studying the Bible, he stopped praying, and he stopped hoping and believing. Every few weeks, the government would march him back into a courtroom to give him the opportunity to renounce his political and theological views. Finally, after months of deprivation, he had decided to give in - to recant.

When they brought him into court this time, he was surprised to see his wife and several members of his church sitting in the gallery. He had not seen her for months, and tears welled up in his eyes. The judge told him to stand up and called on him to renounce his 'traitorous' views. He stood wearily, ready to recant, when suddenly he heard his wife and his Christian friends saying with one voice, "God is alive! God is alive!"

It was all they were able to say, for quickly they were removed from the court. But it was enough. He sat down without betraying his faith, renewed in his confidence that God is, indeed, alive.

When the church rises up to be the church, be assured that the world rises up to be the world. But when the world rises up to be the world, Jesus Christ is risen from the dead … and God is alive! God is alive! When the world rises up to be the world, Jesus Christ is being Lord. So … rise up, and *be* the church!

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